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# The Fragmentation of Identity in the Work of Sylvia Plath: The (Im)possibility of Escaping the "Bell Jar"

Fragmentace identity v díle Sylvie Plathové: (Ne)možnost úniku ze skleněného zvonu

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Vedoucí bakalářské práce (Supervisor)

**Stephan Delbos, M.F.A., Ph.D.**

Zpracovala (Author)

**Aneta Urbanová**

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**KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA**

Sylvia Plath, americká literatura, poválečná poezie, identita, rozpad identity, znovuzrození, smrt

**KEY WORDS**

Sylvia Plath, American literature, post-war poetry, identity, fragmentation of identity, rebirth, death

**ABSTRACT**

This bachelor thesis deals with the theme of women's identity crisis in Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* and the selected poems from her late poetry collection *Ariel*, focusing predominantly on the portrayal of lost and fragmented identity. It establishes Plath's work within the context of her time and argues that the depicted issue of fragmentation does not merely concern a crisis of the individual, rather, it reflects a general sentiment shared by women in the Cold War Era. The objective of the thesis is to determine some of the principal causes of identity disintegration and show its detrimental impact on women's psyche. The analysis further aims to unfold the ways in which Plath's work offers an escape from the inner turmoil, and thus identify the potential resolution to the identity crisis.

The thesis is divided into three separate chapters followed by a conclusion. The introductory chapter provides a general overview of the Cold War era, focusing on the changing political and socio-cultural situation of the 1950s and its role in the disintegration of women's identity. The overall purpose of the chapter is to demonstrate how the identity crisis presented in Plath's work mirrors the life experience of women in the Cold War era. It attempts to outline the oppressive nature of the post-war environment and trace in it the roots of identity disintegration.

The following chapter is concerned with the analysis of identity fragmentation and loss in Plath's poetry and prose. The first two sections address the problematics of self-definition on the protagonist of *The Bell Jar* and argue, in respect to the contextual background of the second chapter, that the split within an individual results from the conflict between the self and the society. The analysis works with the concept of dual self and claims that the fragmented identity is a result of the co-existence of the mutually exclusive authentic and false selves. The final section of the chapter then explores the representation of dispersed identity in the *Ariel*

poems and argues, that the crisis of the female speakers stems from their identification with the male-defined false existence and their repressed individuality. The analysis also introduces the concept of the mythical death of the self as a possible resolution to the identity crisis.

The final chapter of the thesis follows up on the previous analysis of the fragmented self and argues that Plath's work does not merely reflect women's identity crisis, but also offers its possible resolution. The analysis elaborates on the concept of mythical death introduced in the third chapter and shows how Plath deliberately uses the myth in her writing to indicate that death can have a liberating and transformative character, freeing women from the bounds of their false existence. The principal aim of the chapter then, is to unravel the ways in which the identity crisis can be overcome, that is, how the self can either be reborn or transcended. The first section of the chapter deals with the theme of suicide in *The Bell Jar* and argues that concept of mythical rebirth is only fully developed in the *Ariel* poems whose analysis constitutes the final section of the chapter.

**ABSTRAKT**

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá tématem krize ženské identity v románu *Pod skleněným zvonem* Sylvie Plathové a vybraných básních z její pozdní sbírky *Ariel*, přičemž se zaměřuje převážně na zobrazení ztracené a roztříštěné identity. Práce zasazuje dílo Plathové do kontextu její doby a tvrdí, že popisovaný problém fragmentace se netýká pouze krize jednotlivce, ale odráží kolektivní ženské vnímání v době americké studené války. Cílem práce je stanovit některé z hlavních příčin rozpadu identity a ukázat jeho škodlivý dopad na psychiku žen. Analýza si dále klade za cíl odhalit prostředky, které v díle Plathové poskytují únik z tohoto vnitřního zmatku, a identifikovat tak potenciální řešení krize identity.

Práce je rozdělena do tří samostatných kapitol následovaných závěrem. Úvodní kapitola poskytuje obecný přehled o éře studené války se zaměřením na měnící se politickou a sociokulturní situaci v padesátých letech minulého století a její roli v rozpadu ženské identity. Celkovým záměrem kapitoly je ukázat, jak krize identity prezentovaná v díle Sylvie Plathové zrcadlí životní zkušenost žen v době studené války. Snaží se nastínit utiskující charakter poválečného prostředí a vysledovat v něm počátky rozpadu identity.

Následující kapitola se zabývá analýzou rozpadu a ztráty identity v samotné poezii a próze Sylvie Plathové. První dvě části kapitoly řeší problematiku sebedefinice u protagonistky románu *Pod skleněným zvonem* a s ohledem na pozadí doby probrané v druhé kapitole tvrdí, že vnitřní rozkol jedince vyplývá z konfliktu mezi vnitřním Já a společností. Analýza pracuje s pojmem dvojitého Já a tvrdí, že roztříštěná identita vzniká koexistencí vzájemně neslučitelného pravého a falešného Já. Závěrečná část kapitoly pak zkoumá znázornění rozptýlené identity v básních ze sbírky *Ariel* a argumentuje, že krize ženských lyrických subjektů pramení z jejich ztotožnění s falešnou existencí definovanou muži a z jejich potlačené individuality. Analýza také zavádí koncept mytické smrti Já jako možné řešení krize identity.

Závěrečná kapitola práce navazuje na předchozí analýzu roztříštěného Já a tvrdí, že dílo Plathové pouze neodráží ženskou krizi identity, ale nabízí i její možné řešení. Analýza rozpracovává koncept mytické smrti uvedený ve třetí kapitole a dokazuje, že Plathová záměrně užívá tohoto mytického konceptu v próze i poezii, aby naznačila, že smrt může mít pro ženy osvobozující a transformativní charakter. Ukazuje, že smrt může být cestou k propuštění ze svazující falešné existence. Hlavním cílem kapitoly je odhalit způsoby, kterými lze krizi identity překonat, tedy jak může vnitřní Já dosáhnout znovuzrození nebo být úplně překročeno. První část kapitoly se zabývá tématem sebevraždy v románu *Pod skleněným zvonem* a tvrdí, že koncept mýtického znovuzrození je plně rozvinut pouze v básních Ariel, jejichž analýza tvoří poslední část kapitoly.

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# 1 Introduction

Sylvia Plath spent her lifetime juggling the career of a writer with her personal life, trying to satisfy both her maternal and professional desires at a time when it was unusual, if not virtually impossible for women to do so, due to gender limitations imposed by society. Plath struggled to arrive at a definition of herself that would reflect and fulfil these internal contradictory yearnings, but she never quite managed to discern the ultimate meaning of her life while it lasted. She was torn between her individual ambition and social responsibility, aware both of the capacity of her creative power and of its limitations. On the one hand, Plath strove to meet the society's expectations by complying with its rules, but on the other hand, she refused to settle with her predetermined role in the society. As Kendall puts it, "Plath's conformist ambitions existed alongside a profound dissatisfaction with such roles."[1] While Plath was not able to resolve this inner discrepancy in her own life, writing provided an outlet for its confrontation. The identity crisis that accompanied Plath's fragmentary existence then became a subject of both her poetry and prose, notably her novel *The Bell Jar* and the late poetry collection *Ariel* which will both be analysed in detail in the following chapters. It is the purpose of this thesis to discuss the issue of identity fragmentation in its complexity, both in relation to Plath's work and the context of her time.

Since the identity crisis constitutes a pervasive issue rather than an isolated theme in Plath's writing and is as much a reflection of Plath's own life as it is a mirror of the shared experience of women in the Cold War America, the second chapter of the thesis provides an overview of the era to connect the discussion of identity fragmentation in Plath's work with its larger context. It focuses on the political climate characteristic of the 1950s and shows the impact of the tensions of the era on both the cultural and social environment. The chapter aims to illustrate the implications of the changes within the society for the lives of women. With the

[1] Tim Kendall, *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), 50.

help of the excerpts from Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*, it conveys a raw depiction of the detrimental atmosphere of the '50s and traces in it the origins of women's crisis.

The third chapter then narrows down the discussion of identity crisis to Plath's work, exploring the concept of identity fragmentation and loss on the character of Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar* and the female speakers of the selected poems from the *Ariel* collection. It uses the contextual background of the second chapter as a point of reference to illustrate how the concrete examples of disintegration of the self in Plath's work are all individual manifestations of the overarching problem of female definition that emanates from the structure and functioning of post-war American society. The analysis focuses not only on rooting out the causes and consequences of the inner split in women, but it also elaborates on the actual process of identity formation and the constitution of one's selfhood. Among the notable critical studies referenced in this chapter is Judith Kroll's *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath,* which interprets the issue of fragmentation as a tension between the existence of true and false selves. Kroll's criticism will prove particularly significant for the arguments made in this chapter that grow out of the concept of the dual self and establish the loss of identity as a result of the repressed true self and the impersonation of the false selves.

The fourth chapter further pursues the discussion of the split between the true and false selves indicative of the identity crisis and argues that Plath's work unlike her life displays a possibility for the resolution of the inner conflict. It does so by analysing Plath's aforementioned works based on Kroll's study of the dual motif of death and rebirth. The chapter will examine the occurrence of death in Plath's writing and argue that Plath deliberately employs this motif to show that death offers the only true reconciliation of the problem of fragmentation. It will assert that while Plath's *The Bell Jar* introduces the theme of rebirth through death, the *Ariel* poems fully develop the concept, demonstrating that death can either

lead to self-definition through the rebirth of the authentic self, or complete destruction of the self and with it the whole concept of identity through transcendence.

## 2 Plath in Context: Life in Repressive Cold War America

There is a tendency among literary scholars to associate Sylvia Plath's work with the confessional mode in literature because its autobiographical content delivers the trauma of individual experience.[2] To see Plath's writing merely as a form of a personal confession, however, would be to obscure the greater significance of her work, which goes beyond personal drama. Plath herself believed that personal experience was important in writing as long as it was relevant to "the larger things."[3] In both her poetry and prose, she exemplifies this inner conviction by transcending what she calls the "shut-box and mirror looking, narcissistic experience,"[4] writing out of, but not merely of her own life background. Plath's work then displays the ability to combine the personal and the political, as the issues presented within her work relate to a broader context of the American Cold War era. The problem of identity fragmentation in Plath's *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel* which provides the main theme for the analysis in the two following chapters of this thesis, therefore, is not merely a depiction of an individual crisis. Rather, the identity crisis in the female figures of Plath's work reflects the common sentiment felt by the women whose lives were, like the poet's, marked by the harsh reality of the Eisenhower era.

Born in 1932, just three years after the infamous economic disaster of the stock market crash, Sylvia Plath was brought up in a period characterized by financial insecurity, poverty and high unemployment. Little did she know then that her life would be marked by even more turbulent changes in the social and political structure of the post-war era. The 1950s for Plath

[2] M. L. Rosenthal, *The New Poets; American and British Poetry since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 79-89, http://archive.org/details/newpoetsamerican00rose, accessed 27 July 2021.
Edward Butscher, *Sylvia Plath, Method and Madness* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 11. http://archive.org/details/sylviaplathmetho00butsrich. Accessed July 27, 2021.
[3] Peter Orr, *The Poet Speaks* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 146.
[4] Orr, *The Poet Speaks,* 145

were formative. The period marked her transition from adolescence to adulthood and her integration into society, with the beginning of her college studies and first job offers. According to Annas, Plath "determinedly and fiercely wrote of and out of female experience and in the context of the time and place that shaped her."[5] Indeed, the political, social and cultural milieu of the 1950s and its constraining influence on women provided artistic inspiration for the creation of Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* and later became a subject of sarcastic mockery and disdain in the *Ariel* poems. Gill describes the period after the Second World War as "one of profound contradictions."[6] On the one hand she sees it as "a time of peace and relative plenty"[7] associated with the growing post-war prosperity and the creation of new life opportunities, but on the other hand she chooses to describe it as "a period of anxious, defensive retrenchment."[8] These underlying tensions and anxieties, which pervaded American society at that time, reflected the strained political situation, the evolving rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, two former allies.

At the end of the war, the alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union began to fall apart and eventually turned into an open conflict. The two diametrically opposed ideologies of capitalism and communism presented a mutual threat and while the Soviet Union wanted to assume control over the Eastern part of Europe, America feared the expansion of the communist ideology further to the West.[9] The omnipresent anti-communist sentiment[10] in the American society was induced by the looming possibility that the political tension could easily

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[5] Pamela J Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 6, http://archive.org/details/disturbanceinmir0000anna, accessed July 28, 2021.
[6] Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 24.
[7] Gill, 24.
[8] Gill, 25.
[9] James R. Arnold and Roberta Wiener, *Cold War: The Essential Reference Guide* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2012), 9; 13-14, ProQuest Ebook Central. Accessed August 4, 2021.
[10] Lori Clune, *Executing the Rosenbergs: Death and Diplomacy in a Cold War World,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 2, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&profile=eds, accessed August 4, 2021.

escalate into a nuclear conflict between the two countries. The active threat of the Soviet development of the atomic bomb[11] made America cautious in dealing with people who sympathized with the communist regime. The natural feelings of anxiety and mistrust soon developed into an active fight against the practice of communism. Under the pretence of maintaining security within the country, Senator Joseph McCarthy led many groundless and questionable investigations to persecute the people who could somehow be inclined to the left-wing politics.[12] The era of McCarthyism[13] escalated with the scandalous execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, two American citizens who were convicted of espionage for the Soviet Union. The case proved highly controversial and raised speculations among the public about the justice of the couple's death sentence.[14] The dubious electrocution of the Rosenbergs carried out at the peak of the Cold War paranoia did not escape Plath's notice. According to Clark, Plath exhibited a great deal of sympathy for the victims, whose execution left her appalled.

> Plath herself probably did not have detailed knowledge of the case beyond what she read in the papers, but she knew the Rosenbergs were Jewish and that they had belonged to communist organizations. Her mind was already attuned to the ways in which outsiders and nonconformists were pushed to the margins of Eisenhower's America, and she saw the Rosenbergs as innocents paying the ultimate price for their "un-Americanism."[15]

At the time of the Rosenbergs' execution, Plath was working in New York as one of the guest editors of *Mademoiselle*, a fashion magazine, having been granted a Smith university internship of "tremendous prestige,"[16] an experience which would later provide inspiration for *The Bell Jar*. It was there that Plath was fully confronted by the contradictory nature of the Cold War

[11] Arnold, 25.
[12] Arnold, 140.
[13] Arnold, 139-141.
Albert Fried, *McCarthyism: The Great American Red Scare: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1, http://archive.org/details/mccarthyismgreat00frie, accessed August 4, 2021.
[14] Clune, 7.
[15] Heather Clark, *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* (Vintage, 2020), 255.
[16] Clark, 239.

reality, seeing that the post-war American society could boast of its glamour and prosperity and create an intimidating and constraining environment at the same time.

The American fashion industry of the '50s reflected the materialist and consumerist culture that arose after the war as a patriotic response to the poor state of the economy that needed to be boosted. According to Clark, "during her month in Manhattan, Sylvia learned that everyone was selling something, and everything had a price."[17] The excessive spending of money no longer constituted a lifestyle condemned by the lower classes, instead, it was encouraged and aspired to for its "contribu[tion] to the ultimate success of the American way of life."[18] The newly emerged economic strategy associated with high consumption was focused on the circulation of a variety of goods, completely shifting the economic system from "one based on scarcity and need, to one based on abundance and desire."[19] The idea was to attract potential customers who then encouraged the output of the industries and created new jobs, thus contributing to the prosperity of the nation.

The focus on the flourishing of the domestic economy was not only supposed to elevate the living standard of the society, but perhaps more importantly, to strengthen the national security which was under threat of attack. This fear-induced motivation for the accumulation of wealth helped "forti[fy] the boundaries within which [the postwar Americans] lived."[20] As May puts it, "[people] wanted secure jobs, secure homes, and secure marriages in a secure country. Security would enable them to take advantage of the fruits of prosperity and peace,

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[17] Clark, 238.
[18] GBH, "The Rise of American Consumerism," *American Experience*, PBS, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/tupperware-consumer/, accessed 28 July, 2021.
[19] Nigel Whiteley, "Toward a Throw-Away Culture. Consumerism, 'Style Obsolescence' and Cultural Theory in the 1950s and 1960s," *Oxford Art Journal* 10, no. 2 (1987): 5, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1360444, Accessed July 28, 2021.
[20] Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 13, http://archive.org/details/homewardboundame02maye. Accessed July 27, 2021.

that were, at long last, available."[21] To achieve the desired nation-wide economic and social protection, America centred its efforts around building strong and stable family units.

The model of a nuclear family, therefore, became a stronghold of American society. The ideal middle-class family of the 1950s constituted of a mother, father and their children[22] and marked a return to the distribution of the traditional gender roles that had been reversed during the Second World War. The war necessitated that the job positions abandoned by the men who joined the military were temporarily replaced by women labourers to keep the economy running. The emancipative experience of working outside of the household, however, did not last long for women who were expected to return to their previous occupations after the war.[23] The Cold War era was uncompromising in that it did not give women the option to choose between a family life and a successful working career. Women were made to conform to the rules of a society that suppressed their individualism and autonomy and continuously pushed them into marrying young and devoting their lives to the wellbeing of the family. Betty Friedan describes the prototypical image of the 1950s woman thus:

> The suburban housewife – she was the dream image of the young American women and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world. The American housewife – freed by science and labor-saving appliances from the drudgery, the dangers of childbirth and the illnesses of her grandmother. She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She had found true feminine fulfilment. As a housewife and mother, she was respected as a full and equal partner to man in his world. She was free to choose automobiles, clothes, appliances, supermarkets; she had everything that women ever dreamed of.[24]

[21] May, 13.
[22] Patricia Lantz, "The 1950s Family: Structure, Values and Everyday Life," *LoveToKnow,* https://family.lovetoknow.com/about-family-values/1950s-family-structure-values-everyday-life, accessed 29 July, 2021.
[23] Annette McDermott, "How World War II Empowered Women," Web, https://www.history.com/news/how-world-war-ii-empowered-women, accessed July 29, 2021.
[24] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 20th anniversary ed. (New York: Dell Pub. Co., 1984), 18.

This highly idealized depiction of women as content housewives circulated all across the media[25], spreading the domestic propaganda and thus making women believe, that their primary role existed within the household, not outside of it. The society instilled its standards into women who aspired to successfully fulfil their role by obeying the conventions and accepting the limitations imposed by marriage. What the television advertisements and magazine covers did not show, however, was the reverse side of the coin, the "loss of personal freedom, financial independence, 'goals' and 'personal achievements'"[26] that were detrimental to women's mental health. Even though marriage often constituted an oppressive environment in which the woman did not feel particularly satisfied, it was hard for her to imagine that the inner turmoil was not caused by her own failings but rather by her inability to reconcile herself with the role that she had not willingly chosen but had been assigned instead.

> If a woman had a problem in the 1950s and 1960s, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself. Other women were satisfied with their lives, she thought. What kind of a woman was she if she did not feel this mysterious fulfilment waxing the kitchen floor? She was so ashamed to admit her dissatisfaction that she never knew how many other women shared it. If she tried to tell her husband, he didn't understand what she was talking about. She did not really understand it herself.[27]

Women who experienced this kind of disillusionment still felt compelled to continue to play their part within the household as they had been persuaded of their full financial and existential dependency on their husbands. According to May, "forging an independent life outside marriage carried enormous risks of emotional and economic bankruptcy, along with social bankruptcy."[28] In the male-dominated society of the '50s, women lived in the shadows of their husbands who were the ones that had access to better education, attractive professional

[25] Justine Blau, *Betty Friedan* (New York: Chelsea House, 1990), 32-33, http://archive.org/details/bettyfriedan00blau, accessed August 4, 2021.
[26] May, 34.
[27] Friedan, 19.
[28] May, 36.

opportunities and whose contribution to society was valued. Women, unlike men, were deprived of their ambitions and "perfect womanhood" was associated with "passivity and compliancy."[29] While women's academic achievement was still encouraged, they were not deemed capable of meeting their husbands' competence and professional expertise and thus their options were significantly limited.

Women like Plath, who decided to pursue their intellectual ambitions despite the constraining conditions associated with their inferior social status, were often determined to combine their prospective careers and family lives, but in seeking this unattainable direction, they often found themselves reaching a blind alley. Women were left powerless in deciding about their own fate, which was in the hands of their male counterparts.[30] They studied in hopes of building their future when internally they knew that their future was male-defined:

> [Women] know they're not going to use their education. They'll be wives and mothers. You can say you're going to keep on reading and be interested in the [learning] community. But that's not the same. You won't really go on. It's a disappointment to know you're going to stop now, and not go on and use it.[31]

The university environment was, as Clark puts it, "intellectually stimulating but politically suffocating"[32] as "even educated women were encouraged to […] embrace 'the humble role of housewife.'"[33] This complete disregard for women's true ambitions led them to conform to the pressures of society as subordination to the principles dictated by the Cold War era offered the only possibility of self-fulfilment. Women had to deny themselves all future alternative ways of life beyond the bounds of marriage to be able to fully surrender to their own illusory image of a happy wife and mother.[34] However, this utter self-effacement only strengthened the despair

[29] Clark, 875.
[30] Clark, 140.
[31] Friedan, 71.
[32] Clark, 147.
[33] Clark, 147.
[34] Friedan, 58.

that arose from the women's inescapable situation and made them question their own identity. Friedan perceives the female identity crisis as a split between the widely advertised public image of a perfect 1950s woman and the virtually non-existent private image.

> I think that this has been the unknown heart of woman's problem in America for a long time, this lack of a private image. Public images that defy reason and have very little to do with women themselves have had the power to shape too much of their lives.[35]

Women knew they could not identify merely with their predefined role within the household, but they lacked other opportunities for self-discovery. Therefore, they found themselves oscillating between two different versions of themselves – one they could not embody and the other they could not achieve.

Despite the prevalence of these feelings of discrepancy among women, most of Plath's generation suffered in silence, outwardly conforming to the rules of the Cold War society but privately undergoing its pressures. In the early sixties, the time of Plath's biggest creative outburst and paradoxically also of her suicide, the identity crisis affecting women's lives was only beginning to slowly get acknowledged as a real issue by women themselves.[36] It took years for the Cold War atmosphere to settle and for women to finally be able to speak up about their dissatisfaction with the way the society had treated them. Even though the problem of women's oppression and the distribution of gender roles in the post-war American society was not fully addressed until the emergence of second-wave feminism,[37] Plath's work already anticipates the future debates over the woman question by openly expressing the "anger, the self-doubt, and the ambivalence that many intelligent and creative women were experiencing in the late 1960s and early 1970s."[38] The identity crisis in Plath's work, therefore, must be

[35] Friedan, 75.
[36] Friedan, 79.
[37] Margaret Walters, *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2005), 97-116, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&profile=eds, accessed July 31, 2021.
[38] Annas, 6.

understood in its larger context, both as a reflection of the repressive Cold War environment and as a precursor of feminist thought.

The aim of this chapter was to provide a deeper insight into the context of the Cold War era, the time that shaped Sylvia Plath's personal life as well as her writing, and to uncover the roots of the theme of female identity crisis in that period. As has already been established, the 1950s were a decade characterized by the underlying political tensions and anxiety that had a transformative impact on the organization of post-war American society. To ease the political chaos and strengthen ties within the society, America readopted some of its cultural norms that had existed prior to the Second World War, returning to traditional gender roles. It strove to rebuild its national security and prosperity by encouraging the growth of nuclear families and with them the consumerist and materialist culture. Even though the 1950s became synonymous with abundance, they were also a period of silent oppression, making men and women conform to society's expectations. This constraining environment made women question their role outside of the household, depriving them of a sense of self. The analysis in the two following chapters will take up the issue of identity crisis and its reflection in Sylvia Plath's work.

# 3 "And I sit here without identity: faceless": The Loss of Identity and the Fragmented Self in *The Bell Jar* and Plath's Poetry

The following chapter focuses on the issue of identity fragmentation and its loss in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and the late *Ariel* poems. It aims to explore the primary causes of the disintegration of female identity and show how the identity crisis is manifested in Plath's work. The analysis of *The Bell Jar* in the first two sections of the chapter traces the negative impact of the oppressive environment of the post-war American society on the concept of womanhood and its role in the disintegration of identity and the subsequent nervous breakdown of the protagonist. It works with the concept of dual identity, the split into the antithetic true and false selves as a result of the discrepancy felt between the personal aspirations of the individual and the outside limitations of the society. The final section of the chapter then continues with the discussion of the loss of identity and the presence of the false selves in the poems from Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* collection. Similarly as in *The Bell Jar,* the analysis of the poems points out the influence of the society on the formation of identity, linking the existence of the false selves with the conventional male-defined female roles. It also introduces the concept of mythical death and rebirth as a potential resolution to the identity crisis through the death of the false self.

## 3.1 *The Bell Jar* and the Metaphor of the Fig Tree

Sylvia Plath started working on her only novel *The Bell Jar* in 1961 after publishing her first poetry collection, *The Colossus and Other Poems*. Due to its controversial contents and obvious parallels with Plath's personal life, the novel was first published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas in London in 1963 and never saw publication under Plath's real name until after her death.

The largely autobiographical novel traces the gradually deteriorating psyche of a young American woman, a student at a prestigious university facing the pressures of the stifling environment in which she feels entrapped. The early reviews of *The Bell Jar* were rather uncompromising in their joint comparison of Plath's "girlish" prose work with the success of her late poetry.[39] According to Saul Maloff, "*The Bell Jar,* good as it is, must be counted part of Sylvia Plath's juvenilia, along with most of the poems of her first volume; though in the novel as in few of the early poems she foretells the last voice she was ever to command."[40] Plath is still primarily associated with the poetry she wrote towards the end of her life and much literary criticism continues to feed on the cult that has been building around her personality since her suicide in 1963.[41] Her work is rarely analysed in Barthesian terms, that is, based on the idea that the writing should not be interpreted in relation to the biographical context of its author to avoid possible limitations on the text.[42] Instead, critics tend to reduce Plath's writing to an autobiographical reading saying more about Plath's own life and experience than the importance of the work itself.[43] The relevance of the novel, however, goes beyond conclusions offered by the autobiographical content. The novel stands as a reflection of the entire socio-cultural-political context of America in the 1950s transcending the personal experience of the poet and offering a more independent reading.

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[39] Elizabeth Hardwick, "On Sylvia Plath." *The New York Review of Books*, August 12, 1971, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1971/08/12/on-sylvia-plath/, accessed June 22, 2021.
Howard Moss, "Reading *The Bell Jar* in 1971," *The New Yorker*, July 10, 1971, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1971/07/10/dying-an-introduction-howard-moss, accessed June 22, 2021.

[40] Saul Maloff, *"*Waiting for the Voice to Crack,*"* *New Republic,* May 8, 1971, https://newrepublic.com/article/123224/waiting-voice-crack, accessed June 22, 2021.

[41] Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1-10, http://archive.org/details/hauntingofsylvia00jacq, accessed June 22, 2021.

[42] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *The Rustle of Language* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 49-56, http://archive.org/details/rolandbarthesrus0000unse, accessed June 22, 2021.

[43] Margaret Dickie Uroff, "On Reading Sylvia Plath," *College Literature* 6, no. 2 (1979): 121-23, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25111261, accessed June 22.

*The Bell Jar* provides an account of the events leading up to the mental breakdown of the protagonist and her subsequent recovery from an attempted suicide. Esther Greenwood seems to be in conflict not only with herself, but more importantly with the outside world. She spends the majority of her adolescence forming the personal identity of a brilliant student, a literary talent, whose only motivation is to excel and impress. She strives to become, as Bassnett puts it "a set of constructed images, designed to please someone else."[44] The mask that Esther wears to appear successful and desirable to others contradicts how she feels inside. This discrepancy forms the basis of the inner conflict that precedes her ultimate downfall.

The novel's introductory chapter starts off with a grim description of Esther's New York experience:

> I knew something was wrong with me that summer, because all I could think about was the Rosenbergs and how stupid I'd been to buy all those uncomfortable, expensive clothes, hanging limp as fish in my closet, and how all the little successes I'd totted up so happily at college fizzled to nothing outside the slick marble and plate-glass fronts along Madison Avenue. [45]

Esther earns the possibility to participate as a guest editor in one of the leading world fashion magazines over the summer, showing off her skills in a highly competitive environment among eleven other accomplished young ladies. Quite paradoxically, this once-in-a-lifetime experience which she spent years envisaging proves to be a daunting one, as her identity issue surfaces for the first time. In Linda Wagner's words, "In New York Esther acknowledges the inadequacy of the compulsive achievement which dominated her childhood and adolescence, yet cannot find a mature identity to replace it."[46] Esther expresses her longing for "a whole life of marvelous, elaborate decadence"[47] that the superficial fashion industry offers, while at the

[44] Susan Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble Books, 1987), 107.
[45] Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, Faber Paper Covered Editions (London: Faber and Faber, 2019), 2.
[46] Linda W. Wagner, *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath* (Boston, Massachusetts.: G.K. Hall & Company, 1984), 47.
[47] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 5.

same time, she grows more and more alienated from such environment. Her fantasizing about things she does not truly desire is conditioned by the external circumstances which make her aspire to the ideals of the society, rather than to her own standards. Esther becomes disenchanted with society upon her first-hand experience with the reverse of the American dream. New York is nothing like she imagined, the superficial glamour of the environment and its attractive opportunities contrast quite harshly with Esther's true conception of the Cold War reality. Unlike the rest of the young ladies, Esther is unable to reconcile herself with the strictly female roles dictated to her by the society. Her search for individual identity is limited by these constraints:

> I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor […] I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose.[48]

This metaphor is central to the understanding of Esther's inner state. Her conception of the self is diametrically opposed to the classical conventional conception of female identity.[49] Generally, there was a common assumption in the society of women's primary role in the household and their ultimate financial dependence on their male counterparts. This gender stereotype of the 50s[50] is reflected in the character or Mrs. Willard, the mother of Esther's boyfriend, and her conformist idea of female inferiority, where "what a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from."[51] Buddy Willard is the

[48] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 73.
[49] June Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Post-war America, 1945-1960* (Temple University Press, 1994), 1, Google Books, https://books.google.cz/books?id=uFLVTpBKNnMC&dq=women+and+gender+in+postwar+america&lr=&hl=cs&source=gbs_navlinks_s, accessed June 22, 2021.
[50] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 20th anniversary ed. (New York: Dell Pub. Co., 1984), 233-257.
[51] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* 67.

embodiment of this idea of male progress, the leader and protector of the family. But instead of aspiring to marry Buddy, Esther seems repulsed by the thought of such constraining commitment that undoubtedly entails confinement and isolation.

Esther expresses this quite clearly in her mocking contempt of Mrs Willard's words: "The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket."[52] Rather than building her identity around the preconceived patterns, Esther chooses to "[fly] back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another."[53] The result of her inability to pursue a single attainable target is the fragmentation she experiences in relation to her identity.

> I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.[54]

The idea of a multiplied self that is reiterated in *The Bell Jar* through the use of the fig tree metaphor and the firework arrows stands in opposition to a person's original conception of the self. According to Roy Baumeister, a social psychologist, the "essence of self involves integration of diverse experiences into a unity." Unity then, "is one of the defining features of selfhood and identity."[55] Baumeister's claim about the unified identity contradicts the feminist social theories which choose to see the fragmentation of the women's identity as justified by the nature of the oppressive circumstances.[56]

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[52] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* 79.
[53] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 90.
[54] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 73.
[55] Roy F. Baumeister, "The Self" in *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, 4th ed., vol 1., ed. Gilbert, Daniel T.; Fiske, Susan T.; Lindzey, Gardner (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill): 682, web, accessed June 22, 2021.
[56] Susan Bassnett, "God, Nature and Writing," *Women Writers: Sylvia Plath* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble Books, 1987): 52-53, http://archive.org/details/sylviaplath0000bass, accessed June 22, 2021.

The 1950s were not a suitable milieu for the intellectual female flourishing, as the only "figs"[57] women could pick were the roles of a mother and a wife, roles that were at the time considered incompatible with other professions. Women like Esther grew up with the conformist philosophy preached to them by their mothers, they were born into the inferior social position, destined to build families and falling victim to the double sexual standard of the era, while men like Buddy Willard were encouraged to pursue their careers and make their own names in the world.[58] Esther seems very much aware of this discrepancy: "What I hate is the thought of being under a man's thumb […] A man doesn't have to worry in the world, while I've got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line."[59] In her refusing to conform to the conventional female roles, there is already a different kind of consciousness forming. Esther experiences a split within herself, a desire to be several different women at once. The prospect of marrying young and throwing away her literary career in favour of a happy marriage seems nothing but depressing.

Betty Friedan, one of the leading figures of the second-wave feminist movement, speaks about this female dichotomy as "the problem that has no name."[60] Friedan's work addresses the problem, that of fragmentation, eventually leading to a mental breakdown of the protagonist in *The Bell Jar*, not as a problem of a weak individual, but rather as a pervasive feature in post-war America, where women were limited to their external expectations.[61] Therefore, Esther's striving for the multiplicity of female experience, her desire to seize "each and every" fig on the bough can only result in a complete dispersal of her identity.

[57] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* 73.
[58] Blau, 32; 34-35.
Annas*, A Disturbance in Mirrors,* 100-101.
[59] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* 212.
[60] Friedan, 20.
[61] Blau, 42.

The crisis of identity constitutes the central theme of *The Bell Jar.* Though it deals predominantly with a split experienced within an individual, it also unravels a split much deeper in the American society of the era, serving as a mirror of the gender politics of the '50s and its impact on the women's psyche. The above analysis serves as a more general outline of the problematics of the fragmentation of identity, going beyond the text of the novel to provide a better understanding of the close connection between the environment and its role in the formation of one's identity. The next section of this chapter is going to analyse the issue of fragmentation in detail, looking both into the structure of the fragmented identity and its different manifestations in Plath's work.

### 3.2 Mirror Images and Reflections: A Self in the Outside World

In her essay "On Female Identity," Judith Gardiner explores the notion of womanhood, looking at the works of male psychoanalytic literary critics and rejecting their understanding of identity as unique, coherent and stable. According to her, the male theorists "assume a male paradigm for human experience" overlooking the gender difference in their generalizations about human identity.[62] Gardiner challenges their views by arguing that female identity is a process[63], rather than a stable uniform concept: "I picture female identity as typically less fixed, less unitary, and more flexible than male individuality."[64] She further argues that the process of identity formation is often perceived as a linear one with a direct accomplishment, that is, one's acquisition of a unified sense of self.[65] However, such understanding of identity formation is sometimes wrongly attributed to women, whose experience with search for identity is much more complicated. Therefore, female identity deserves a different kind of approach – one, that takes into account the multiplicity of female experience and sees identity as a fluid, perpetually

[62]Judith Kegan Gardiner, "On Female Identity and Writing by Women," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (1981): 348, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343167, accessed June 23, 2021.
[63] Gardiner, 352.
[64] Gardiner, 353.
[65] Gardiner, 352.

changing construct, influenced by an interplay of different internal and external factors. The following analysis continues the discussion of the fragmentation in *The Bell Jar,* working with precisely this conceptualization of female identity, exploring the role of the external factor of the environment in the disintegration of Esther's identity and her internal identification with other women through their mirroring as an attempt to achieve her own sense of self.

### 3.2.1 The Multiplicity of Identity: A Dual Conception of the Self

The manifestation of identity in Sylvia Plath's poetry and prose never comes close to the concept of a unified self. Rather, her work is a representation of a turbulent set of mind processes which strive to find that unity among the broken fragments. As Annas sees it, it is a search "not so much for definition of self as for redefinition of self."[66] Plath's writing is characterized by its instability, violence of expression, being full of contradictions and tensions that reflect the fragmented state of mind. The various dispersed selves serve as temporary representations of identity, that are in conflict with each other, and therefore need to be constantly redefined. Hughes traces a pattern in Plath's writing, where "the central experience [is that of] a shattering of the self, and the labour of fitting it together again or finding a new one."[67] In this way, Plath's tendencies can be seen as self-destructive. However, this disintegration and renewal of identity is a cyclical process, where despite the fact that the unity cannot ever be fully reached, one self has to be destroyed in order for a new one to come into existence. Identity for Plath is by no means a stable construct, but instead, it is always fluid, ever-changing and never reaching its full conclusive definition. For this reason, it is futile to explore identity as a singular concept and at the same time it is necessary to accept its multiplicity of forms. The process of fragmentation itself cannot be understood simply as a self-inflicted one, a result of a self-destructive behaviour. To see it as such would be to radically

[66] Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors,* 20.
[67] Ted Hughes, "Notes on the chronological order of Sylvia Plath's poems," *Tri-Quarterly*, no.7 (Fall 1966), 81.

simplify matters and exclude the participation of the environment in the formation of human identity. In Plath's writing, the self is never truly autonomous, but always in conflict with the outside world to some extent.

As demonstrated with the metaphor of the fig tree in the previous section, the fragmentation of Esther's identity in *The Bell Jar* is a result of her inability to console the desires of her inner self with the demands inflicted upon her by the society. It is reflective of what Annas terms "the dialectical tension between the self and world"[68]. Such tension creates a discrepancy between the perception of the self in relation to itself, constituting the inner identity of the individual, and the self in relation to the world, forming a different kind of secondary identity that shapes and transforms itself according to the pressures of the environment. This dual conception of human identity works with the idea of the fragmented "I" dispersed into the inner, authentic self, and the outer false selves, which are mutually exclusive.[69] This supports the argument of the identity being fluid, rather than static, and prone to change from within as well as from outside, providing a framework for the analysis of the dual motif of loss or death of the identity and its subsequent recovery or rebirth. Such duality can be applied to the whole extent of Plath's work, where identity is never conclusive, but always built on contradictions. Her writing exhibits a constant power struggle between the death of one self and the emergence of another. Analysing Plath's work in this dual perspective aims to trace the loss of the identity and the possibility of its recovery and thus maintain and prove the argument, that the quest for identity is by no means a linear process and that female identity is prone to constant redefinition.

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[68] Pamela J. Annas, "The Self in the World: The Social Context of Sylvia Plath's Late Poems," *Women's Studies* 7, n. 1/2 (January 1980): 171, https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.1980.9978511, accessed June 22, 2021.

[69] Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper, 1978), 28, http://archive.org/details/chaptersinmythol00judi, accessed June 22, 2021.

### 3.2.2 The Emergence and Loss of the False Selves in *The Bell Jar*

In relation to the dual conception of the self, Kroll speaks of the frequent coexistence of the true, authentic self and the false, dominated self.[70] However, such co-existence is responsible for the inner divergence, where one self tries to assert dominance over the other, inevitably resulting in a fractured identity. Perloff describes the main objective in *The Bell Jar* as "[an] attempt to heal the fracture between inner self and false-self system so that a real and viable identity can come into existence"[71]. Esther Greenwood is a representative of such "fracture" leading to an identity crisis which transforms the ambitious young woman into a broken individual in need of psychiatric care. Deprived of her authenticity, she falls victim to the false-self system.

Esther grows up cultivating what she thinks is her real, inner self, but in reality, she is constantly conforming to the wishes and ambitions of the people around her. She pushes herself beyond the limits to attain good grades, receive scholarships and get academic praise. Esther is incarcerated in this role of brilliant student and what seems to be her own desire for academic success is really just a projection of the "internalized social restrictions,"[72] that leave her aware of no other alternative for self-growth. These social restrictions imposed on the young women in the '50s limit the possibilities of self-expression and self-cultivation, making it difficult for the women to locate their potential and aim for an authentic self-image.

The selfhood of women like Esther Greenwood is being constantly threatened by these limitations, which indirectly force them to succumb to the society's made-up ideal of womanhood. Esther Greenwood, despite consciously wanting to free herself from such binding constructs, becomes caught in a trap of her own psyche, as she, instead of aspiring to her self-

[70] Kroll, 11.
[71] Marjorie G. Perloff, "A Ritual for Being Born Twice: Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar," *Contemporary Literature* 13, n. 4 (1972): 509, https://doi.org/10.2307/1207445, accessed June 29, 2021.
[72] Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors*, 45.

fabricated image of womanhood, internalizes those external limitations. Therefore, her inner, authentic self gets suppressed and creates an internal void, depriving Esther of any sense of identity at all. Esther describes these feelings of emptiness in the following words:

> I felt like a racehorse in a world without racetracks or a champion college footballer suddenly confronted by Wall Street and a business suit, his days of glory shrunk to a little gold cup on his mantel with a date engraved on it like the date on a tombstone. [73]

She likens her experience to that of a winning racehorse and a successful football player that are both denied the one thing that has dictated their life purpose and find themselves completely lost. Similarly, Esther reaches the peak of her academic career and wins a scholarship to pursue a promising work experience in New York that can start off her career. Ironically, the experience proves to have quite the opposite effect on Esther. Though the world around her remains unaltered, Esther undergoes a drastic internal change, feeling misplaced and fully detached from the external reality: "I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo."[74] The internalized conformist pattern of her past behaviour no longer proves effectual in the current situation, when confronted with the many possibilities of the real world, outside of the enclosed academic environment. Esther has attained the status of a brilliant student, but just like the racehorse in the metaphor, she finds herself without any other track to pursue, hanging between the glory of her past and the insecurity of the future to come.

There is a crucial moment in the novel, when Jay Cee, Esther's female boss at the New York fashion magazine, asks her about her future ambitions and Esther, startled, responds: I don't really know," I heard myself say. I felt a deep shock, hearing myself say that, because the

[73] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* 72.
[74] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 2-3.

minute I said it, I knew it was true."[75] For Esther, this is a moment of true self-reflection. Turning to her own consciousness for an answer, she experiences the split within herself. While her inner self takes time to ponder the question, the outer self pronounces the truth – Esther does not know who she is any more. She can no longer be defined by her past success, but fails to see herself in any of the conventionally accepted female roles. Her own constructed reality starts to crumble under the influence of the external stimuli. Esther tries to hold onto the remains of her old identity, trying to persuade herself as well as others of her stability while internally, she experiences the fracture.

Esther Greenwood's loss of her old identity makes her vulnerable in social interactions with other people. Unable to visualize her own role in the society, she experiences a kind of depersonalization. She feels completely detached from her own body and thoughts which puts her in the position of an observer, rather than an experiencer of her life. Plath works with mirror images throughout the novel to emphasize Esther's inner turmoil and the inability to trace her own self in the distorted mirror image. The way Esther chooses to depict the encounter of her non-existent suppressed inner self with the outward physical representation of her identity is, essentially, as that of two diametrically different people. She does this in the second chapter, where catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror of the elevator, she notices "a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into [her] face."[76] Similarly, later on in the novel, Esther's mirror reflection is likened to an image of "a sick Indian."[77] In yet another instance, emotionally disconnected Esther refers to the 'stranger' in the mirror: "you couldn't tell whether the person in the picture was a man or a woman, because their hair was shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken-feather tufts all over their head […]."[78] Not only does Esther lose connection

[75]Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 30.
[76] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 17.
[77] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 108.
[78] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* 168.

to the authentic self, but she also struggles to accept the reflection of her physical appearance. Esther feels removed from the outside reality as if trapped in the vacuum of the bell jar, "stewing in [her] own sour air."[79] The metaphoric image of the bell jar is employed to illustrate Esther's sense of entrapment, isolation and loss. Just like the mirror, the glass wall of the bell jar puts a boundary between Esther's inner and outer selves, locking her in and making her perceive reality in an altered manner: "the face looked like the reflection in a ball of dentist's mercury."[80]

Trapped under the bell jar, lacking the authentic self, Esther tries to blend in among her contemporaries by merely imitating their lifestyles and thus creating a set of multiple co-existing false selves, none of which truly succeed in filling the void she feels inside. Perloff speaks about Esther's "repeated attempts […] to find both a female model whom she can emulate and a man whom she need not despise," thus describing Esther's dilemma based on her inability to either fully accept or reject the different identities that are being offered to her as a woman.[81] Throughout the novel, Esther aspires to various female figures. Doreen, one of Esther's friends from the magazine is a counterpart to Esther's old, composed self. Esther admires her intelligence and cunningness, her boldness to go against the social conventions and get away with her unorthodox sexual behaviour. In a way, Doreen brings out Esther's suppressed wild ambitions. Esther expresses her urge to resemble Doreen superficially, but internally, she feels closer to Betsy, a similarly innocent girl, a sort of a flat character, with respect to rules and conventions. Esther finds that the various false outer selves that she embodies are each suitable for different occasions. Therefore, she uses these false selves like masks, changing her inner attitude and aspirations based on her surroundings. She is constantly oscillating between Betsy and Doreen, the two opposing female roles, one that makes her conform to the rules of the society, while the other encourages her to break them. She expresses

[79] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 178.
[80] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 18.
[81] Perloff, 511.

the frustration with not being able to choose one over the other in her own words: "If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days."[82] This is again reflective of the fragmentary nature of Ester's consciousness.

When Esther's quest for the identity traits among her contemporaries proves ineffectual, she turns to the older generation of women in whom she searches for experience and wisdom that comes with being an independent adult in the world of too many possibilities. Notable among such figures is her own mother. Mrs. Greenwood, however, is incapable of providing her daughter with the right example, demonstrating, as Perloff sees her, "a terrifying presence in the novel."[83] Mrs. Greenwood ultimately fails in helping build a sense of identity in Esther, independent of that bound with her academic success. Esther looks for a direction among other elderly women, inspired by the literary career of her benefactress Philomena Guinea, the relentless ambition of her boss Jay Cee and finally the motherly, caring nature of her psychiatrist Doctor Nolan. However idealistic their lives may appear on the surface, their identities are not at all stable, but rather full of unresolved contradictions.

Esther finds a temporary solution to her problem of wanting to be several people at once by coming up with her own false identity inspired by the women and constructed from the various alternative false selves. Towards the end of the first chapter, she introduces herself as Elly Higginbottom and gives her explanation for that: "I didn't want anything I said or did that night to be associated with me and my real name and coming from Boston."[84] By putting aside her paradoxical identity and imagining herself in the role of another woman, Esther feels the freedom to become anyone she desires without making any permanent alterations within

[82] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 90.
[83] Perloff, 512.
[84] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 11.

herself. The false identity serves its purpose by enabling Esther to momentarily escape her crisis, but at the same time it doubly removes her from her consciousness, contributing to her feelings of depersonalization and detachment. This false identity, then, also needs to be destroyed in order to allow for the flourishing of the authentic self.

Esther's inner split results from the confusion between the self-imposed identity and the internalized social conception of selfhood. The true self becomes suppressed by Esther's subconscious yielding to the social pressures. Her false integrity is broken along with the fabricated reality, leaving her alienated both from her surroundings and her own self. Such depersonalization issues from Esther's utter loss of self-definition. The mirror images in the novel reflect that inability to connect the inner self with its outer representation because of the discrepancy felt between the two images of oneself. The loss of individuality pushes Esther to experiment with various false selves, inspired by the example of other women in her life. By emulating their patterns of existence, she hopes to achieve an authentic identity for herself. However, the presence of the false selves prevents Esther from discovering her individuality and embracing it. To be able to overcome the loss of identity and reconnect with herself, the false self must be discarded, and a new connection made with her authentic self. This process of reclaiming one's lost identity in *The Bell Jar* becomes all the more relevant in the *Ariel* poems.

### 3.3 The Theme of Loss and Death in Plath's Poetry

A similarly complicated search for identity characteristic of *The Bell Jar* takes place in Sylvia Plath's late poetry, notably in *Ariel,* a poetry collection written in the turbulent last months before her suicide in February of 1963. Heather Clark describes the poetic achievement of *Ariel* as such:

> These were the poems that would, as she predicted, make her name. Plath lifted the veil to reveal ugly realities about her own life, and her society. She filled these

> poems with images of torture, murder, genocide, war, suicide, illness, revenge, and fury – but also spring, rebirth, and triumph. Her language would shock and startle, but her path was well trodden. [85]

These poems from "the crucible of […] inner being,"[86] reflect the tensions that Plath herself experienced as a woman forced to live up to the standards of the patriarchal society. They express the frustration that stems from her inability to "recognize and reconcile"[87] these contradictions. In parallel to the exploration of Esther Greenwood's psyche in *The Bell Jar,* the personas of *Ariel* poems manifest an almost identical struggle to make sense of the fragmented pieces of mind that constitute one's identity. The late poems are an exploration of the boundaries of the self, where the false and true selves often co-exist and assume power over each other, resulting in "the feeling of being at once helpless and trapped while truly powerful and free."[88] This paradoxical state that the personas of the poems find themselves in is indicative of the dual conception of the self. The personas oscillate between the antithetic selves, struggling for unity and stability in their perpetual motion.

Judith Kroll traces the larger significance of the theme of death and suicide in Plath's late poems, establishing the dual motif of death and rebirth[89] as crucial for the understanding of the existing polarities and manifestations of fragmentation in the poems. While the fourth chapter of this thesis discusses the theme of recovery of identity trough rebirth and transcendence in detail, the purpose of this analysis is to focus solely on the portrayal of the fractured identity in the *Ariel* poems.

As Kroll argues, the false selves that the personas of the poems embody are often associated with male-defined roles for women.[90] Perhaps the most conventional of these, the

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[85] Clark, 764-765.
[86] Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (Penguin Books, 1989), 264.
[87] Annas*, A Disturbance in Mirrors*, 5-6.
[88] Kroll, 11.
[89] Kroll, 12.
[90] Kroll, 10.

role of a good, obedient wife, stands out in "The Applicant," where the inner self of the woman is completely suppressed and sacrificed in marriage. The female persona in the poem is dehumanized and commodified, losing her human integrity and authenticity, made into a "living doll."[91]

> It can sew, it can cook,
> It can talk, talk, talk.
>
> It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
> You have a hole, it's a poultice.
> You have an eye, it's an image.
> My boy, it's your last resort.
> Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.[92]

Annas emphasizes Plath's use of metonymy – while the hand can "sew" and "cook," the mouth can "talk, talk, talk," each body part serving its specially designed purpose. Such fragmentation implies that the body parts can function separately, but not as a whole. The woman literally must sacrifice parts of herself for the benefit of the man. She gets rid of her authentic self, the part of her identity responsible for her individuality and self-dependence and succumbs to the social expectations by taking on the role of the wife that is inflicted on her. The loss of inner potential is so profound that it reduces the psyche of the woman to nothingness. While the false identity permits her to function efficiently within marriage, it makes it impossible for her to exist apart from it.[93] The subjugation thus entirely deprives the woman of self-reliance, making her fully dependent on her male counterpart as she becomes her husband's property.

Similar dynamics between a man and a woman pervades "Purdah," where the woman perceives herself as a mere extension of the man – "The antagonized / Side of green Adam."[94] The title of the poem itself refers to an oppressive religious practice associated with Muslim and Hindu communities where women are forced to conceal their bodies from men. In the poem,

[91] Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems*, Reprint edition (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2018), 221.
[92] Plath, *Collected Poems*, 222.
[93] Annas*, A Disturbance in Mirrors*, 107.
[94] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 242.

the female persona is a "jeweled doll" that the man "guards like a heart."[95] Like in "The Applicant," the woman's inner self is suppressed and overcome by the false subservient self which transforms the woman into a commodity, her husband's prized possession. However, unlike the silenced female persona in "The Applicant," the speaker in "Purdah" uses her voice to express her frustration with the loss of identity: "I am his. /Even in is /Absence, I / Revolve in my / Sheath of impossibles, / Priceless and quiet / Among these parakeets, macaws!"[96] The speaker "gleam[s] like a mirror" and the husband is described as "lord of the mirrors."[97] The mirroring structure in the poem, similarly as in *The Bell Jar,* is employed to emphasize the underlying identity crisis.

While in the novel Plath uses the mirror imagery to show Esther's depersonalization from the world and herself, where she is unable to make sense of her existing, but fragmented identity, here the speaker utterly loses her inner self, becoming "an instrument of self-reflection for others"[98] and thus impersonating a set of false selves. Her husband exercises his ultimate control over her, and she in turn, grants him an even bigger sense of power by reflecting his own self. This unequal distribution of power within marriage shows just how difficult it is for a woman to assert her authentic self in her powerless position. Marriage for the woman, therefore, is a commitment that makes her a prisoner of her own impaired identity.

While the false self persists, it is the individuality of the woman that suffers a blow. Plath further develops this idea of a repressed inner self in "Stings," by likening her existence to that of a worker bee inside of a beehive: "Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful. / I stand in a column / of winged, unmiraculous women, / Honey-drudgers."[99] The beehive

[95] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 244.
[96] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 243.
[97] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 242.
[98] Sally Bayley, and Tracy Brain, ed. *Representing Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3.
[99] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 214.

hierarchy in which the "unmiraculous" drudgers sacrifice themselves for the smooth-running machinery of the entire bee community can be understood as a metaphor for the constraining roles experienced by women in marriage. There is a discrepancy between the suppressed inner potential and desire to be someone else on the one hand, and the compliance with the false self on the other: "The self is both bee and beekeeper, worker and queen, on the boundary between commitment and alienation, trapped within her culture but refusing to accept her assigned place in it."[100] The speaker of the poem expresses this ambivalence by taking the following stance: "I am no drudge / Though for years I have eaten dust / And dried plates with my dense hair."[101] Just like the speaker in "Purdah," she struggles to put together the fragments of her identity, but in spite of that, she is communicating her resentment of being confined to such reality. The honey drudge in the poem is aware of her individuality, though outwardly, she does not differ significantly from the other worker bees. Overlooked and commodified, she becomes part of a bigger system, in which only the false fragment of her identity is taken as relevant and contributory for the wellbeing of the community. Her interiority is reduced to a state which she can neither settle with nor comprehend, leaving her in a hopeless situation.

Such inner confinement resulting from the opposing efforts to both embody and oppose the male-defined role proves unbearable. The woman speaker in "I Am Vertical" paints the same picture of hopelessness as the speaker of "Stings," pointing out the stasis associated with being unable to move in any direction and pursue one's potential: "I am vertical / But I would rather be horizontal. / I am not a tree with my root in the soil / […] Nor am I the beauty of a garden bed / […] I want the one's longevity and the other's daring."[102] The speaker here also embarks on a quest for identity that is lost, but not irretrievable. In wishing to be "horizontal," she thinks of death of the false self as a possible resolution of her inner conflict. According to

[100] Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors*, 161.
[101] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 214.
[102] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 162.

Lavers "to the maimed self […] daily life cannot give back wholeness […] and death can actually be welcome, since it frees one."[103] The speakers of Plath's late poems do not fear death or suicide and are not threatened by the finality of the act. Instead, as Kroll argues, death reveals a capacity for life: "one explanation of a longing for death might […] be the instinctual sense that in confronting death, one can recover from a spoiled history."[104] For the entrapped woman, death, either ritual or literal, presents a way out of detachment and isolation, a way to claim back the healthy identity fragments and destroy the usurping false self.

In the poems where the speakers are held back by their false existence, death represents an escape. The suicide in "Lady Lazarus" serves this precise purpose. When the "peanut-crunching crowd / shoves in to see" [105] the dead body of the woman, watching the spectacle unveil, the speaker of the poem mocks their attempts to retrieve the already liberated old self: "Ash, ash – / You poke and stir. / Flesh, bone, there is nothing there – / A cake of soap, / A wedding ring, / A gold filling."[106] The artifacts retrieved from the ashes are mere remains of her old identity, the one that no longer defines her. They present the atoms of the shattered self, a process in which the unified self disintegrates, and people are "absorbed into their artifacts,"[107] dispersed into fragments.

The shedding of the old identity through a deliberate ritual killing of the false self is also a subject of "Daddy" beginning with the following lines: "You do not do, you do not do / Any more, black shoe / In which I have lived like a foot / For thirty years, poor and white, / Barely daring to breathe or Achoo"[108]. The speaker is haunted by an image of her deceased oppressive father. Though he is no longer physically present in her life, the feeling of being dominated by

[103] Charles Newman, *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 127.
[104] Kroll, 167.
[105] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 245.
[106] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 246.
[107] Annas, "The Self in the World," 181.
[108] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 222.

him persists. In order to free herself from such dominance, the speaker must erase his image by killing off the fragment of her identity associated with the father-daughter relationship.

The female personas of the above-discussed *Ariel* poems all share the same fragmented state of being defined either by a partial or complete loss of identity. Their restrained existence is bound to the other-defined false identity. By living up to that false self, the women fulfil the expectations of their surroundings, but at the same time lose connection to their own individuality. Plath's late poems actively oppose and mock this "death-in-life"[109] and use the theme of death and suicide as a way out of such entrapment. As Kroll puts it, "either the false self or the male (or both) must be killed to allow rebirth of the true self." [110] Only when the false self is destroyed, a new authentic one can emerge.

As indicated in this chapter, the female figures in both Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel* share the problem of identity fragmentation, where the false selves that the women embody are in conflict with their suppressed individuality. The purpose of the analysis, then, was to not only portray the ways in which Plath touches upon the problem of fragmentation in her work, but to also identify the causes and the implications of such inner discrepancy. As has been argued so far, the false selves that arise from the projection of the society's expectations for women only superficially reflect the actual experience of being a woman, tending to the needs of the society, rather than those of the individual. Therefore, the women in Plath's work all suffer from a lack of self-definition that results from the impossibility to seek their own potential within the repressive environment and thus impersonating the male-defined roles instead. Though the search for the authentic identity seems futile when sabotaged by the pervading false existence, Plath still explores how the duality of the self can be overcome. As has been implied in the final section of this chapter, she does so by employing the imagery of

[109] Kroll, 12.
[110] Kroll, 13.

the mythic death and rebirth in her poetry and prose. The principal aim of the next chapter then, is to offer a potential resolution of the identity crisis, where the death of the false self becomes the basic presumption for the liberation of the individual from the inner turmoil.

# 4 "I have a self to recover, a queen": Rebirth and Recovery

This chapter follows up on the discussion in the previous sections about the causes of the fragmentation of identity and its implications for the life of the individual in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel*. While it has already been established that the identity crisis cannot be resolved in life because life itself stands partly responsible for the inner split, the aim of this chapter is to explore the ways in which Plath uses the theme of death and suicide in her work to show that there is a potential for a final reconciliation. The first section deals with suicide in *The Bell Jar* and introduces the theme of a mythic rebirth of the self, which is then brought up again in the next section that focuses on the parallel portrayal of mythic death and rebirth in Plath's late poetry collection *Ariel*. The last section of the chapter goes beyond the theme of rebirth, exploring the transcendent quality of the poems.

## 4.1 Suicide as an Act of Liberation: The Road to Recovery in *The Bell Jar*

In his article "On Sylvia Plath," Ted Hughes traces the obvious influence of Plath's experimental prose writing in *The Bell Jar* on the development of her poetic genius: "Without undergoing the psychic transformation of self-remaking, which she accomplished in writing this scenario, the author might not have come […] to the inspiration and release of Ariel."[111] According to him, the novel very much prefigures Plath's late poetry in its subject matter, notably the quest for identity through the ritual of death and rebirth, a theme which Plath revisits and fully develops in the *Ariel* poems.[112] The novel, then, can be understood both as a chronological and thematic precursor to her *Ariel* collection, establishing the death and rebirth ritual as a necessary and inevitable process in the formation of identity. While death does not

[111] Ted Hughes, "On Sylvia Plath," *Raritan*, vol. 14 no. 2 (Fall 1994):1, EBSCO, http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=asn&AN=9502081727&lang=cs&site=eds-live&scope=site, accessed June 25, 2021.
[112] Hughes, "On Sylvia Plath," 1.

always automatically entail a possibility for rebirth, rebirth cannot be arrived at without a preceding death. Therefore, when there is a chance for the rebirth of the self, death becomes its essential prerequisite. For Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*, death is an ambiguous concept. It is a way of getting rid of the old identity but at the same time a means towards achieving a new one.

Esther's ambivalent attitude towards death shows both her repulsion and fascination with it. In referring to the execution of the Rosenbergs,[113] she affirms this paradoxical attitude by first expressing her resentment of death: "The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick," only to reveal her obsession with it a couple lines later: "It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves."[114] In the first half of the novel, death, though omnipresent, is merely of a passive, almost symbolic character. It corresponds to Esther's feelings of alienation, the death-in-life[115] that she experiences in New York, and shows her slowly deteriorating state of mind. What starts as an attraction to the phenomenon of death soon evolves into an active contemplation of it. The dispersal of identity into various incompatible false selves makes it hard for Esther to envision the future: "I counted one, two, three…nineteen telephone poles, and then the wires dangled into space and try as I would, I couldn't see a single pole beyond the nineteenth."[116] The past disintegrates along with her old self, leaving her searching for self-definition in a world where the desire for individuality is at odds with the stereotypical conformist attitude expected of women. The constrained identity merely enables Esther to blend in among other empty women by imitating their actions, but it erases her inner self and thus completely deprives her of her own sense of power. Self-assertion proves impossible through the manifestation of either of the

[113] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 1.
[114] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 1.
[115] Kroll, 12.
[116] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 118.

outer selves that do not reflect Esther's own ambitions. Esther voices the feeling of powerlessness which comes with the realization that one is controlled by society, rather than being in control of her life "I wasn't steering anything, not even myself. I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolley-bus."[117] Esther feels the need to regain control over herself but is unable to do so on her own. The power she seeks is not to be found within her fragmentary consciousness. Therefore, her situation necessitates an outside intervention.

Growing steadily more depressed and detached from reality upon returning home from New York, Esther is referred to a local psychiatrist, Doctor Gordon. Unable to help herself at that point, Esther is left with no other option but to respect medical advice and hope that through professional care, she can set out on a path toward self-recovery. However, the trust that Esther puts into the psychiatric institution is broken upon her first visit to the doctor's office, when her expectations of the appointment are met with the harsh reality of psychiatry in the 1950s. Clark describes the mental institutions of the era as "inherently sexist," entertaining the idea that only men could be mentally healthy, associating female sanity with domestic proficiency.[118]

Such an approach to treating women's mental issues while disregarding their primary cause and the severity of the symptoms is seen in the portrayal of Doctor Gordon's indifferent behaviour towards Esther: "I thought he was going to tell me his diagnosis, and that perhaps I had judged him too hastily and too unkindly. But he only said, 'I remember your college well. I was up there during the war."[119] Plath shows Esther idealizing the workings of the mental institutions, only to be let down by them later: "I had imagined a kind, ugly, intuitive man looking up and saying 'Ah!' […] as if he could see something I couldn't."[120] Esther's desire for

[117] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 2.
[118] Clark, 267.
[119] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 126.
[120] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 123.

her problems to be heard and resolved, for her experience of "being stuffed farther and farther into a black, airless sack with no way out"[121] to be understood, is met with a cold dismissal from the psychiatrist himself. While the appointment with Doctor Gordon is supposed to help Esther out of the "black, airless sack,"[122] it has the exact opposite effect on her. She withdraws even further into herself and succumbs to the despair that comes from the strong feeling of confinement. On her second visit, she repeats her concerns to Doctor Gordon "in the same dull, flat voice, only […] angrier," frustrated with his "unimpressed" look[123] and highly unprofessional behaviour. Esther is aware of her own vulnerability. By putting herself under the scrutiny of Doctor Gordon, she is consciously turning to her last resort, as there is nowhere else to turn. Her cries for help are met with rejection when instead of being offered reassurance and a proper diagnosis, Esther is prescribed electroconvulsive therapy at a private hospital. At the time this was a universal treatment "still in its infancy," seen as a "crude therapy, often unpleasant and frightening for patients."[124] Esther's account of her first-hand experience of the mental hospital environment is no less daunting than the actual treatment.

The unpleasant atmosphere of the place only foreshadows the horror of the shock therapy that is about to come: "I felt as if I were sitting in the window of an enormous department store. The figures around me weren't people, but shop dummies, painted to resemble people and propped up in attitudes counterfeiting life."[125] Esther, without yet undergoing the treatment herself, can visibly trace the unpleasant impact of it on the other patients. She observes mere shadows of people, mannequins without life in them, who seem to be completely absent and unaware of their surroundings. According to Clark, the "promising results" of shock treatment had a lot to do with "the memory loss that accompanied [it and]

[121] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 123.
[122] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 123.
[123] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 129.
[124] Clark, 268.
[125] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 136.

often wiped away patients' fear of it."[126] Unlike the other patients, whose memory has been erased by the experience and their physical existence reduced to that of the "shop dummies," Esther's memory of the moment is a vivid one: "something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the word. […] with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant."[127] Looking back at the atrocious experience, Esther wonders "what terrible thing it was that [she] had done,"[128] unable to make sense of the new trauma and let go of it. She certainly does not observe any kind of "wonderful improvement"[129] in relation to the treatment. On the contrary, the vivid, unerasable incident only contributes to the rapid deterioration of her mental state, removing her further from reality and undermining her already weakened connections to the people around her. Esther refuses to undergo another session with Doctor Gordon, though she knows that there is no offer of an alternative treatment to the shock therapy, or any less drastic handling of the problem. Therefore, having exhausted this last chance for recovery by rejecting the treatment, she is once again left to confront the inner problem on her own. Helpless as she is, Esther finds living in her present state unbearable.

In such absence of life, death presents itself as the only feasible option. As Kendall puts it, "unable to find a satisfactory alternative, Esther gradually narrows down her options to just one: suicide."[130] Death by suicide in *The Bell Jar* – as in the *Ariel* poems – loses its tragic aspect. It becomes an act of transformation and liberation of the self from oppressive circumstances, a way of regaining ultimate control over one's life. Therefore, suicide in Plath's work should be regarded as "an assertion of power, of the strength – not the weakness – of the

[126] Clark, 268.
[127] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 138.
[128] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 138.
[129] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 139.
[130] Kendall, 53.

personality."[131] Esther's contemplation of suicide has little to do with her wanting to experience actual physical death. Rather, what makes suicide so intriguing to her is the possibility of killing off the false self along with one's old identity in the process to allow rebirth into a different kind of reality. When Esther reveals the inner urge that drives her towards suicide, she emphasizes that the physical aspect of death is not what she really seeks. Instead, she is looking for a spiritual kind of death and rebirth: "It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at."[132] It is not her own body that she wants to kill, but the false identity associated with it. Thus, Esther looks for a liberation from the constraints of the mind, not from the body. The point of suicide then is not to oppose existence, but to allow it instead.

Therefore, suicide for Esther paradoxically represents the only means of self-preservation, as she sees in it the potential for life. According to Hardwick, "the death wish [is] an instinctual compliment to the vast and intricate efforts to survive."[133] In other words, Esther's consideration of suicide does not stem from her desire to experience the finality of death, but rather from the need to escape her death-in-life[134] situation – the inner turmoil misunderstood and disregarded by the society, which itself is largely responsible for Esther's breakdown.

Considering society's influence on Esther's psyche, it is perhaps too far-fetched to suggest the direct link between Doctor Gordon's neglect and Esther's consecutive suicide attempt. However, what is evident is Esther's conviction of the incurable nature of her disease, after not being given a proper diagnosis that would justify the prescribed shock treatment. Lacking the much-needed answers to her problems, Esther turns to self-diagnosis: "I had bought a few paperbacks on abnormal psychology and compared my symptoms with the symptoms in

[131] Elizabeth Hardwick, *Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature* (New York: Random House, 1974), 112.
[132] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 142.
[133] Hardwick, *Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature*, 114.
[134] Kroll, 12.

the books, and sure enough, my symptoms tallied with the most hopeless cases."[135] Not only does the reading of the psychology articles not alleviate Esther's state of mind, but it even helps instil the feeling of utter hopelessness in her. Both Holbrook and Clark criticize the tendency of the society of the era to downplay the severity of the symptoms and its failing to provide the needed support and understanding: "in the mystifying processes [of psychiatry], the patient's true meanings are lost. We do not hear what is really wrong: and it is this that is disastrous."[136] According to Clark, the psychological works of the time were full of inaccuracies and wrong terminology.[137] This only adds to Esther's feelings of confusion and alienation and makes it impossible for her to identify the real underlying causes of her disintegration. Thus, Esther's reading not only slows, but completely prevents her recovery. As Holbrook argues, suicide for Esther is "a false conclusion to the problem of self-definition," a way to "work out, unaided, her sense of how to bring the unborn self to birth."[138] Esther's longing for the "annihilation of death"[139] can, with this logic, be understood as a wish to be reborn and achieve a kind of purified vision. She believes that she will be able to establish a true identity only through the absolute death of her present one.

The quest for self-definition, therefore, becomes a "quest for purity,"[140] through the appropriation of a new, authentic self. The desire for a purified state of existence is seen in Esther's depiction of her near-death experience on a ski slope, an event which precedes her actual suicide attempt.

> People and trees receded on either hand like the dark sides of a tunnel as I hurtled on to the still, bright point at the end of it, the pebble at the bottom of the well, the white sweet baby cradled in its mother's belly.[141]

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[135] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 153.
[136] David Holbrook, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* (London: Athlone Press, 1976), 14-15, http://archive.org/details/sylviaplathpoetr0000holb, accessed June 28, 2021.
[137] Clark, 267.
[138] Holbrook, 15.
[139] Perloff, 520.
[140] Holbrook, 85.
[141] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 93.

Esther describes the thrill of going downhill at an uncontrollable speed as going through darkness, which implies the dangerous proximity of death on the one hand, and the almost tangible purity of the experience on the other. She knows she must first submit herself to the dark of the "tunnel"[142] to emerge through the light at the other end. The passage clarifies Esther's understanding of death as a transformative experience. In seeing death as a precursor to rebirth, Esther's fear of death is obscured by the ecstasy that comes with the possibility of self-transformation through rebirth. However, such intensity of emotion is short-lived. Esther's near-death experience brings what Kendall calls "a temporary triumph,"[143] but her survival of the accident prevents the actual completion of the rebirth process. The incident proves unsuccessful in ridding Ester of her present identity and establishing an authentic one, pure and unlimited by the constraints. Despite its overall failing to transform Esther's existence, the accident reinforces her need to achieve the spiritual purity she associates with death. She wants to "[grow] saintly and thin and essential as the blade of a knife."[144] Therefore, the search for purification becomes the main motivation for her subsequent suicide attempt.

This time, it is no coincidence when Esther again finds herself "at the mouth of the darkness,"[145] huddled up in a crawlspace of the cellar, about to swallow a bottle of sleeping pills and let herself be consumed by death:

> The earth seemed friendly under my bare feet, but cold. I wondered how long it had been since this particular square of soil had seen the sun […] The dark felt thick as velvet […] Cobwebs touched my face with the softness of moths. [146]

To successfully finish her transformation, Esther deliberately seeks the darkest, least accessible corner with no space to move about where she can retreat into the shell of her body. According

[142] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 93.
[143] Kendall, 65.
[144] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 94.
[145] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 162.
[146] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 162-63.

to Holbrook, Esther's decision to end her life in the darkest and remotest place in the house is an attempt to bring "the unborn self to birth" through the "regression […] to the tomb."[147] Esther buries herself in the hole of the cellar in hopes of minimizing the traces of her physical existence and the identity associated with it. She exhibits the desire for complete regression through her self-reflection when she imagines her physical presence shrinking into that of a "worm"[148] or a "troll."[149]

Esther associates the physical death of the body with the emancipation of the self. She can only save herself through the act of self-destruction. According to Holbrook, "to die is the ultimate freedom from ambivalence […] of human emotions: its purity is an escape from humanness."[150] The purity is associated with absolute transcendence, that is the rising above the human experience and thus rejecting the concept of selfhood as such. As Kendall argues, identity is "a limiting construct"[151] for Esther, and she must push herself beyond the boundaries of identity to assert herself against its oppression.[152] Therefore, the success of her suicide attempt depends on her ability to sacrifice her earthly existence and let go of her "mundane self" to allow for the "transcendent identity" to be disclosed.[153]

The rebirth that Esther experiences is not the kind of rebirth she had hoped for. Found and revived, she is brought back into the familiar dark reality with no hope for the "bright point"[154] at the end of the tunnel.

> Then I felt warmth, like a hand on my face. I must be lying in the sun. If I opened my eyes, I would see colours and shapes bending in upon me like nurses.
> I opened my eyes.
> It was completely dark.[155]

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[147] Holbrook, 15.
[148] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 164.
[149] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 162.
[150] Holbrook, 85.
[151] Kendall, 54.
[152] Kendall, 53.
[153] Kroll, 214.
[154] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 105.
[155] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* 165.

There is no evidence of the inner transformation when confronted by her family about her condition, as Esther bitterly affirms that she feels "the same."[156] The thwarted suicide offers no resolution to the identity conflict, but it is does initiate the lengthy process of recovery.

Following her suicide attempt, Esther is institutionalized in a private mental hospital, where she is once again subjected to a series of shock therapy treatments, this time in a much more pleasant environment, under the supervision of a new, sympathetic female doctor. Esther begins to notice the positive effects of the treatment, despite her initial doubts and resistance. The metaphorical bell jar, the burden of her inner disintegration, is temporarily lifted, allowing her to breathe: "I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air."[157] This gradual process of recovery enables Esther to slowly resume a normal life, but at the same time, it serves as a false indicator of moving forward from her past. Esther's condition is at last stabilized, but the success of the therapy is disputable. Though it helps her integrate back into the society, it offers "no form of reconciliation"[158] with it. The society has not changed and with it, the actual causes of Esther's breakdown remain untreated. As Kendall puts it, "in terms of discovering an underlying stable identity, [Esther] remains as faceless at the end of the novel as at the beginning."[159] There is no definitive transformation "from artificial ego to authentic self"[160] through the ritual of rebirth at the end of the novel. Instead, brought back to life, Esther assumes an identity dangerously close to her "battered old self."[161] Her newly forged identity, just like her previous one, is by no means unified but merely reassembled, leaving Esther "patched, retreaded and approved for the road."[162] It is a false kind of rebirth, one where the old identity disintegrates only to be put

[156] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 166.
[157] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 206.
[158] Kendall, 56.
[159] Kendall, 56.
[160] Hughes, "On Sylvia Plath," 57.
[161] Kendall, 56.
[162] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 233.

back together. Esther's identity is not transformed but instead largely compromised. Her survival, thus, necessitates a return to her false existence. Conscious of her unresolved inner turmoil, Esther fears the underlying threat of another breakdown: "How did I know that someday – at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere – the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn't descend again?"[163] Esther's finished treatment presents a temporary solution to a persistent identity issue. The uncertainty of the future, therefore, stands in the way of her true recovery.

In *The Bell Jar*, the promise of life-in-death through the emancipative act of suicide is what inspires the heroine's fascination with death. After a cycle of failed psychiatric appointments, Esther finds comfort in suicide as a means of killing off her old identity and with it the entire concept of selfhood to free herself from the multiplied reality and achieve a transcendent, unified vision. Esther's hope for the inner transformation dissolves along with her unsuccessful suicide attempt as she is forced to readapt to her old existence. While the rebirth process is not perfected in *The Bell Jar*, the novel reflects Plath's preoccupation with the motif of death and rebirth as such, foreshadowing the transcendental quality of the late poems.

## 4.2 Rebirth and Transcendence in *Ariel*

In her study of Plath's late poetry, Kroll describes the *Ariel* poems as "exploratory attempts to release the true self and to establish an authentic existence."[164] Thematically, they are a perpetuation of the struggle for self-assertion and self-definition portrayed by Esther Greenwood's character in *The Bell Jar*. While in the novel, Esther's recovery is marked by a false rebirth into a familiar reality, a mere return to the false existence, the *Ariel* poems present a continuation to Esther's unsuccessful quest for identity in their "movement toward

[163] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 230.
[164] Kroll, 12.

absoluteness."[165] The poems are a manifestation of Plath's transcendental vision conceived but unfulfilled in *The Bell Jar*. They achieve a purity of expression unprecedented in Plath's work. According to Hughes, "a real self […] is a rare thing. The direct speech of a real self is rarer still."[166] As seen in *The Bell Jar*, the authentic identity is often suppressed or obscured by the presence of the false selves. It is only in *Ariel* that the problem of false existence is finally overcome and that the death of the false self either allows for the rebirth of the self or its complete transcendence.

### 4.2.1 The Mythic Rebirth of the Self

In the late poems, the two opposite and mutually exclusive modes of existence, life and death, become parallel. The poems challenge the conventional understanding of death as cessation of life by paradoxically showing its life-sustaining capacity. In *Ariel,* death is not merely "a waiting denouement of every life,"[167] rather, it is the sought-after destination. When living in an inescapable and intolerable reality is synonymous with death, the only way to liberate oneself from such constrained existence is through suicide to that life. As Kroll puts it, "Plath's late poems […] convey the sense that the future is foreclosed, that no substantial change can be occasioned by experience, and that only rebirth or transcendence of self would be a resolution."[168] Therefore, suicide in *Ariel*, similarly to *The Bell Jar* is not an act of desperation, but a deliberate triumphant killing of the false identity. It is a way of giving meaning to an otherwise meaningless existence through the promise of rebirth. For Plath, it is the realm of death that entails the possibility of life. Thus, the landscape of death in the late

[165] Kroll, 106.
[166] Ted Hughes, "Foreword," *The Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962*, ed. Frances McCullough and Ted Hughes (New York: Dial Press, 1982), 12, quoted in Linda W. Wagner, *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath* (Boston, Massachusetts.: G.K. Hall & Company, 1984), 17.
[166] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 5.
[167] Hardwick, *Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature*, 114.
[168] Kroll, 3.

poems does not illustrate the self-destructive aspect of suicide, on the contrary, it brings out the transfiguring potential of the act.

The emancipation from the oppressive circumstances becomes the primary motivation for suicide in the poems where the woman speaker wants to free herself from the constraining influence of the male. As argued in the second chapter, the killing of the old self associated with the male figure frees the woman into a new kind of existence, one where the self can be redefined independently of the man. The purpose of suicide in the poems that deal with these male-female relationships then, is not to abandon the idea of selfhood completely, but to alter its boundaries, so that the repressed authentic self can replace the male-defined element by assuming control over it. This resolution of the power struggle between the conflicting selves through suicide is what Kroll calls a "mythic rebirth."[169] It is essentially a physical death of the false self followed by an awakening into the already familiar, but in many ways altered reality.

In "Daddy," the speaker strives for the mythic rebirth through the ritual murder of the dead father image. Unable to come to terms with her father's premature death, the speaker internalizes the immense guilt and grief associated with the father's passing that slowly take over her psyche. The father, despite his physical absence constitutes a strong usurping presence in the speaker's consciousness. He is "marble-heavy, a bag full of God, / Ghastly statue with one gray toe / Big as a Frisco seal."[170] The unresolved inner conflict between the speaker and the intimidating patriarchal figure of her deceased father affects even her personal relationships with other men, as she subconsciously seeks in them the similar character defining features – "I thought every German was you […] I made a model of you, / A man in black with a Meinkampf look // And a love of the rack and the screw. / And I said I do, I do."[171] For the

[169] Kroll, 172.
[170] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 222.
[171] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 223-24.

speaker, to do away with the pervading daddy image means to free herself from the position of a victimized female and thus assume an authoritative existence. Such existence, however, is only possible at the cost of "destroying a portion of her own psychological constitution with which she has lived, however detrimentally, all of her life."[172] The father figure forms an inseparable part of the speaker's present identity, imprisoning her in the "black shoe"[173] of her mind. Therefore, the entire process of "psychic purgation,"[174] that is the elimination of the father's continuing formative impact on the speaker's identity, can only be completed through utter self-destruction.[175] The speaker finally achieves her desired rebirth by cutting off the connection to her father as well as to her own self: "So daddy, I'm finally through. / The black telephone's off at the root, / The voices just can't worm through."[176] Quite ironically, it is the implied self-annihilation of the speaker that eventually opens the way for self-assertion, allowing the true self to come to the surface.

The same kind of mythic rebirth through the "ritual slaying"[177] of both the oppressor and the oppressed self, is re-enacted in "Purdah." Just like the speaker of "Daddy," who struggles to overcome the bounds of her impaired psyche and liberate herself from the harm caused by the mental oppression of her father, the speaker of "Purdah" strives to break free from the physical and mental limitations imposed upon her by her husband. She is "his / Even in his // Absence,"[178] fully dependent on the man, commodified and appropriated by him. The state of forced subjugation, "the sheath of impossibles,"[179] that the speaker finds herself in, is followed by a direct revolt. The woman threatens to destroy the man's ego by letting out a single

[172] Wagner, *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*, 126.
[173] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 222.
[174] Wagner, *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*, 125.
[175] Wagner, *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*, 127.
[176] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 224.
[177] Kroll, 108.
[178] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 243.
[179] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 243.

"note // shattering / the chandelier / of air that all day flies // Its crystals / A million ignorants."[180] She is ready to put out the shine of her husband, the "lord of the mirrors"[181] by extinguishing her own light, breaking out of the mirror image she used to inhabit: "I shall unloose – / From the small jeweled / Doll he guards like a heart – // The lioness, / The shriek in the bath, / The cloak of holes."[182] As Kroll puts it, "when [the speaker] unlooses her true self, 'the lioness,' and destroys her false self, the 'jeweled doll,' [the husband] will also be destroyed because that false self *is* his separable soul."[183] By "unloosing" herself, the speaker openly defies convention and rejects the superior status of the male, turning her back on the male-dominated environment. Thus, the pattern of a mythic death and rebirth is once again completed with the disintegration of the oppressed self as a result of the speaker's personal rebellion, and the ensuing acquisition of the new powerful self.

The resurrection of identity through the revolt against the confining patriarchal structure demonstrated in "Purdah" is continued in "Lady Lazarus." Here the speaker "annihilate[s] each decade"[184] by attempting suicide to put an end to what Annas terms the "brutal and dehumanizing relationship between the individual and her society,"[185] only to experience the comeback "to the same place, the same face, the same brute."[186] The speaker expresses her resentment over being revived and coming back to life bearing the same burden of her false existence: "Gentlemen, ladies // These are my hands / My knees. / I may be skin and bone, // Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman."[187] Just like Esther Greenwood's attempted suicide in *The Bell Jar* proves unsuccessful in transforming her identity, the multiple suicide attempts of the speaker in "Lady Lazarus" also fail to discontinue her growing inner turmoil by

[180] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 243.
[181] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 242.
[182] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 244.
[183] Kroll, 157.
[184] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 245.
[185] Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors,* 136.
[186] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 246.
[187] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 245.

keeping the true self at bay, preventing it from taking its full effect and restoring the speaker's old identity instead. For the speaker, "dying / is an art, like everything else."[188] It is only through the art of dying that she can exercise her true potential by ridding herself of the hardship of life, showing her "contempt toward the peanut-crunching crowd."[189] Rendered powerless in life by the virtue of her subjugated position, the speaker finally asserts her power by committing a suicide to that life and thus rising above the male domination: "Herr God, Herr Lucifer / Beware / Beware. // Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air."[190] As Kroll puts it, the speaker "leave[s] behind the ashes of […] the dead self, consumed along with the 'men,'"[191] destroying "them as she destroys their creation."[192] As in "Purdah" and "Daddy," the mythic rebirth of the speaker, her "fiery resurrection,"[193] is achieved through self-sacrifice – the death of the dominated self and the ritual murder of the oppressor.

In "Stings," the speaker asserts her authentic self by rejecting the role of a drudge in a beehive, a metaphoric depiction of constraining domesticity. She dissociates herself from the "unmiraculous women," who "only scurry, / Whose news is the open cherry, the open clover."[194] She knows better than to merely sacrifice her life for a man like the other honey-drudgers who die after stinging: "They thought death was worth it, but I / Have a self to recover, a queen."[195] The speaker knows, that "simply cutting off life cannot complete or resolve a spoiled history."[196] Therefore, is she must die, self-transformation, not self-sacrifice, becomes the primary objective. The speaker does not perceive death as a surrender to the authority of the male, on the contrary, death carries a bigger significance with its potential for the transformation

[188] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 245.
[189] Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors,* 138.
[190] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 246-47.
[191] Kroll, 120.
[192] Kroll, 155.
[193] Kroll, 120.
[194] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 214.
[195] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 215.
[196] Kroll, 170.

of the self. Death by suicide is an act of defiance against the traditional power relations in the society, giving the female the ultimate sense of control through the possibility of self-realization. The speaker in "Stings" assumes power by reclaiming the "dead," "sleeping"[197] part of her identity, the queen bee: "It is almost over. / I am in control."[198] According to Kroll, "Plath uses the idea of the queenship with its ongoing immortality to express that the true self can always be recovered, however dormant or dead, while the false self […] can *really* be permanently killed or altered."[199] It is the false self associated with the drudge that the speaker is leaving behind as she heads for the sky: "Now she is flying / More terrible than she ever was, red / Scar in the sky, red comet / Over the engine that killed her – / The mausoleum, the wax house."[200] The speaker's mythic rebirth marks an escape from the confinement and "the beginning of a new cycle and a new hive"[201] at the same time. Thus, her flight does not represent a mere journey to the death destination, but instead is a manifestation of the complex metamorphosis of the self.

Another poem which deals with the theme of self-transformation through the passage from life into death is "Getting There." While in "Stings" Plath uses the metaphoric image of the flight of the queen bee to illustrate that the final rebirth is a result of a dynamic process, a journey, rather than a coincidence, in "Getting There," she employs the metaphor of a train ride for the same purpose. The speaker shows her impatience to reach the final destination of death when in the two beginning lines of the poem she asks herself "How far is it? / How far is it now?"[202] knowing that the journey is a long and painful one: "It is Russia I have to get across, it is some war or other."[203] The poem is very explicit in likening the death-in-life existence of

[197] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 215.
[198] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 214.
[199] Kroll, 148.
[200] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 215.
[201] Annas, 159.
[202] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 247.
[203] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 248.

the speaker to the horrors of war: "Legs, arms piled outside / The tent of unending cries – / A hospital of dolls. / […] Dynasty of broken arrows!"[204] Kroll describes the train ride experience of the speaker as a "nightmare journey through entanglement, confusion and suffering."[205] There is no stopping the metaphorical train of existence, it is "steaming and breathing, its teeth / Ready to roll, like a devil's. / [it] is dragging itself, it is screaming – / An Animal / Insane for the destination."[206] The life of the speaker cannot simply be paused and resumed, just like the train, it is rushing forward along a linear trajectory. As Aird puts it, "the only stillness which the traveller of 'Getting There' can hope for is in the complete immobility of death."[207] It is when the train begins to slow down and "the carriages rock" turning to "cradles,"[208] that the speaker transitions to death, dismissing her false self by "stepping from this skin / Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces."[209] In her death, there is the implied new beginning when the speaker's self emerges as a new-born baby, reintroducing her to the purity of the primary existence: "[I] step to you from the black car of Lethe, / Pure as a baby."[210] Thus, the speaker is reborn into a new, yet familiar kind of reality, stripped of her past existence.

The *Ariel* poems can be considered Plath's greatest poetic achievement in that they encapsulate the complexity of human existence by demonstrating that life and death are both closely related concepts that play a crucial role in the practice of self-definition. The poems thematically go beyond the problematics of *The Bell Jar*, where the main focus is still on the dispersal of identity and the tragic aspect of the false existence, only touching upon the theme of rebirth through suicide. In the novel, rebirth hangs in the air as a possibility, but the full transformation of identity is never reached. However, the late poems are a proof that the death-

[204] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 248.
[205] Kroll, 158.
[206] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 248.
[207] Eileen Aird, *Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper & Row, Barnes & Noble Books, 1973), 85.
[208] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 249.
[209] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 249.
[210] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 249.

in-life existence can indeed be overcome. In the above-discussed *Ariel* poems, death implies the return to an enhanced selfhood – a purified existence. Nonetheless, as the analysis in the next section is going to show, even the mythic rebirth can be exceeded by the complete transcendence of identity.

### 4.2.2 Beyond Selfhood: Transcendence in the Late Poems

The *Ariel* poems that are the focus of the following analysis deserve to be discussed separately from the poems in the preceding section as they represent the triumphant transcendence of the problem of the dispersed identity and the death-in-life existence as such in Plath's poetry. These poems are a manifestation of a clear unified vision that stems from the ultimate rejection of the concept of selfhood. This vision is not achieved by reassembling the fragments of one's identity so that one may be reborn into another form of selfhood. Rather, the unity in these poems can be understood as the final resolution of the inner turmoil through the total transcendence of the self. Instead of a return to the already familiar reality alongside a partial recovery of selfhood, these transcendent poems are characterized by the speaker's transition from a concrete physical reality into a more abstract one. The transcendence in the late poems then, is a much less tangible concept resulting in the fusion of the self with the other. If the fusion is to be successful, the self must be dismissed, not recovered.

In Plath's transcendent late poems, selfhood itself becomes an obstacle on the way toward spiritual liberation. To die and be reborn into "another drama of selfhood"[211] is a curse for the speaker whose only hope lies in the "dissolution of the ego into a larger Self."[212] Unlike transcendence, which entails an all-encompassing transformation of the individual, the mythic rebirth is a cyclical process where, as Plath clarifies in "Totem," "there is no terminus, only suitcases // Out of which the same self unfolds like a suit / Bald and shiny, with pockets of

[211] Kroll, 194.
[212] Kroll, 173.

wishes, / Notions and tickers, short circuits and folding mirrors."[213] Therefore, to break out of the repetitive cycle of mythic rebirth and experience the "terminus," one has to discard all the different possible manifestations of the self and submit to the reality of physical non-existence, thus transcending the limitations of the consciousness, which is bound up with the concept of identity.

This abandonment of identity is the subject of "Fever 103°, where the speaker "ascends from Hell to Paradise,"[214] by surmounting her impurities. In her feverish state, the speaker reveals her suffering by likening her fever to "hellfire or flames of punishment"[215] There seems to be no escape from her death-in-life situation, as she cannot get rid of the false identity, the very "sin" of her existence. Even "the tongues of hell / […] are incapable / Of licking clean // The aguey tendon, the sin, the sin."[216] The hellish suffering of the self is not a mere product of the speaker's delirious fantasies, rather, it is a state reflecting her mundane experience of the oppressive reality. The speaker is trapped in the fire of her false existence: The "yellow sullen smokes / Make their own element. / They will not rise, // But trundle round the globe / Choking the aged and the meek."[217] However, a shift in the speaker's consciousness occurs when she realizes that suffering is a necessary part of the purification process.

This realization provides a partial answer to the narrator's question at the beginning of the poem: "Pure? What does it mean?" Though purity remains an unknown experience for the speaker at this stage, she now apprehends the nature of her suffering, seeing the pain as an essential sacrifice for her self-transformation. The talk of "radiation," "Hiroshima ash," or a "ghastly orchid,"[218] related to the imagery of hell and explicitly referring to the speaker's

[213] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 264-65.
[214] Kroll, 55.
[215] Kroll, 178
[216] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 231.
[217] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 231.
[218] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 231.

feelings of torment, changes into images of purification: "I am a lantern – // My head a moon / Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin / Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive."[219] By succumbing to the suffering and letting herself be consumed by it, the speaker transforms the heat associated with the flames of hell into the light of heaven: "Does not my heat astound you. And my light. […] // I think I am going up, / I think I may rise / […] love, I // Am a pure acetylene / Virgin."[220] The speaker is being cleansed of the burden of her past existence as she takes control into her own hands. She merges with the fire, becoming "pure acetylene," a bright strong flame igniting "another order of existence,"[221] her "selves dissolving, old whore petticoats) – / To Paradise."[222] As Kroll puts it, through absolute transcendence of the self, the speaker sheds off "not only sin (a problem the ego has) but the mundane 'selves' (a problem the ego is)"[223] Thus, by transgressing the limitations of the self, the speaker identifies with the "impersonal 'Self' of the universe"[224] and merges into the external reality.

The fusion of the self with the other, which constitutes the theme of "Fever 103°," is perhaps even more evident in "Ariel," a poem reflecting the "ecstatic unity"[225] that stems from the experience of self-transcendence. While "Fever 103°" is individually concerned with both the suffering of the self and its consequent purification, only implying the mutual connection between the two processes, "Ariel" already incorporates suffering into its transcendental imagery, intertwining the feelings of torment and ecstasy, which shows the complexity of the experience. That such experience is full of seeming paradoxes is demonstrated in the opening lines of the poem, when the "stasis in darkness,"[226] an image of negativity which is associated

[219] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 232.
[220] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 232.
[221] Kroll, 180.
[222] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 232.
[223] Kroll, 179.
[224] Kroll, 172.
[225] Kroll, 180.
[226] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 239.

with death or the stasis of false existence, suddenly changes into the "substanceless blue"[227] of the sky, an image evoking the purity of heaven. The speaker goes from a complete standstill to being "haul[ed] […] through air"[228] by a galloping horse, feeling their two bodies merge into one: "God's lioness, / How one we grow, / Pivot of heels and knees." [229] This glimpse of unity is interrupted by the "Nigger-eye / Berries" that "cast dark / Hooks – "[230] The berries along the way momentarily suspend both the literal and spiritual passage of the speaker. They represent the remains of the speaker's physical existence, the fragments that constitute her false identity. As she begins to "unpeel" those "dead hands, dead stringencies,"[231] discarding the burden of her past, she experiences an unprecedented sense of power. Similarly to the woman in "Fever 103°," who fuses with the fire, turning into the flame, the speaker of "Ariel" merges with her surroundings, becoming "pure motion."[232] There is a sense of a rising urgency accompanying the process of purification when the body starts losing its physical shape: "And now I / Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas."[233] In this moment the "self appears to suffer obliteration"[234] and the boundaries between the inner and outer realities are broken down completely.[235] The transcendental unity is completed when the speaker merges with the sunrise, symbolically entering a new transformed existence: "And I / Am the arrow, // The dew that flies / Suicidal, at one with the drive / Into the red // Eye, the cauldron of morning."[236] As Rosenblatt puts it, the speaker is "resurrected as nonhuman energy travelling across space."[237] Therefore, as the end of the poem suggests, the spiritual transcendence presents the highest attainable target in

[227] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 239.
[228] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 239.
[229] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 239.
[230] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 239.
[231] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 239.
[232] Clark, 795.
[233] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 239.
[234] Wagner, *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*, 93.
[235] Hall, 88.
[236] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 239.
[237] Jon Rosenblatt, "Sylvia Plath: The Drama of Initiation," *Twentieth Century Literature* 25, no.1 (1979): 21-36, JSTOR, doi:10.2307/441398, accessed July 16, 2021.

the quest for purified existence. It is only through this surpassing of the worldly experience that the "drama of selfhood"[238] can be fully abandoned.

The two poems "Fever 103°" and "Ariel" from Plath's *Ariel* collection represent a final breakthrough for Plath, as they show that the only true liberation of the self lies in the spiritual transcendence. While the poems preoccupied with the myth of death and rebirth still struggle to reconcile the identity issue by establishing an authentic self, the above analysis illustrates that these transcendent late poems go one step further in stigmatizing the entire concept of identity. Instead of merely striving to eradicate the problematic false existence, they resist all manifestations of self. The ultimate purity then, does not come with the rebirth of the self, but with its abandonment. The rejection of selfhood frees the individual from the suffering caused by the unresolved inner turmoil and transforms that suffering into a unifying force which propels the person through the "cauldron of morning"[239] into freedom.

The purpose of the above analysis was to develop the theme of mythical death, rebirth and transcendence that Sylvia Plath employs both in her novel *The Bell Jar* and the late poetry collection *Ariel* and to show how the concept of death and rebirth is related to the problem of the identity crisis discussed in detail in the third chapter of this thesis. As argued in the previous chapter, Plath's work does not propose any solution to the issue of identity fragmentation in life as paradoxically, the cultivation of the false selves at the cost of the complete suppression of authenticity presents the only way of survival. However, as this chapter has tried to prove, Plath goes beyond the realm of life in her poetry and prose, using the images of death and suicide to demonstrate that self-destruction can either be a way toward self-definition through rebirth of the self or complete self-annihilation through the act of transcendence.

[238] Kroll, 194.
[239] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 239.

# 5 Conclusion

As a woman living and writing in the 1950s and '60s, Sylvia Plath had to face the relentless pressures of the Cold War society whose norms dictated women's lives for them. Instead of willingly succumbing to these standards, Plath displayed immense inner strength and determination in actively opposing them all her life. She would not let the society take her independence from her as creative and personal autonomy were the basic preconditions for the successful writing career that she longed for. Plath could not tolerate the limitations that prevented her from finding her own place in the post-war society and she went against the odds of her time to achieve her own desires. She refused to be held back by living up to the image of the ideal housewife and tending merely to the needs of the family, instead she was determined to fully invest herself in both personal life and professional career. Plath knew no compromises when it came to her ambitions. She could not reconcile herself with a one-sided life, instead, she wanted it all, just like the protagonist of *The Bell Jar,* who was unable to choose only one of the many figs on the tree.[240] Plath too, aspired to become several different women at once. However, such a way of life was not compatible with whatever conditions the 1950s had provided for women. The adverse circumstances of the era, therefore, forced Plath to lead a double life. Her public compliant appearance was in constant conflict with her private rebellion against the rules of the patriarchal system. Despite her lifelong individualistic efforts to resist the outside pressures, Plath became a prisoner, and later a victim, of her time. The society outpowered her and suppressed her unorthodox intentions. Plath, who seemed to have depended first and foremost on her own authority in life, could not bear her powerless position in a male-dominated world. Perhaps suicide for her, as for the female speakers of *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel* also entailed the same escape from the "drudgery"[241] and struggles of everyday life under the

[240] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 73.
[241] Plath, *Collected Poems,* 214.

domination of the oppressive system. What remains clear is, that while Plath was never given a chance to fully confront and conquer her inner enemy – the identity crisis from which she suffered as a woman – her own writing became a strong platform for self-expression. Though society showed no interest in women's private struggles at the time, Plath had a lot to say, and she did not stay silent, addressing the issue of female identity crisis in her work.

In her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, Plath mirrors the atmosphere of the 1950s, drawing from her own life experience in shaping the character of Esther Greenwood. Esther suffers from an identity crisis caused by her inner contradictory desires that cannot be satisfied as they do not conform to the society's image of an ideal woman. Her fragmented identity reflects the split between the inner, authentic self, that is her repressed non-conformist nature, and the outer, false selves that put individuality aside in an effort to imitate the stereotypes and thus live up to the social standards. Plath records this loss of unified perspective not just in the novel, but also in her poetry. The speakers of the *Ariel* poems discussed in the thesis all show signs of identity crisis that is once again linked to the discrepancy between the false selves portrayed by the male-defined roles and the inner authentic selves that conceal in themselves women's true potential. In poems like "The Applicant," "Purdah," or "Stings," Plath deromanticizes the subject of marriage alongside women's role within the household and uncovers their constraining aspect. The poems demonstrate that marriage entails sacrifice and self-denial for women, depriving them of authority and authenticity.

As established, the lives of the female speakers of both *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel* poems are defined by their false existence, lacking a sense of self. However, they do not reconcile themselves with their fractured identity and instead aim to escape their inner turmoil. Esther Greenwood attempts suicide in hopes of restoring her identity and bringing her true self to life, however, her attempt is unsuccessful and results in a recovery of her false self, not the birth of her authentic one. Plath leaves the question of Esther's fate unanswered with the novel's

dubious ending which suggests that the cure of her identity crisis is only temporary. Nevertheless, Plath does succeed in providing a more permanent "cure" of the issue of identity fragmentation in her late poems, where death and suicide indeed presents an escape from the oppressive reality. In the previously mentioned poems as well as in "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus," and "Getting There," the death of the false self implies a mythical rebirth, or, in other words, a return to purified existence, ridding the speakers of their old identity. In "Ariel" and "Fever 103°" Plath abandons the idea of selfhood altogether and shows that only the act of complete self-transcendence through suicide can resolve the inner turmoil.

Sylvia Plath might have never overcome the inner turmoil in her personal life, but as the analysis in this thesis shows, she did achieve self-transcendence in her work, reaching a final resolution to the crisis. The lines of Plath's last *Ariel* poem resonate with this literary achievement: "The woman is perfected. / Her dead // Body wears the smile of accomplishment."

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